Against Ephemeral Architecture: When Only Failure Pays

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Ephemeral architecture is often discussed as though temporariness were, in itself, an aesthetic or conceptual virtue. But in general, ephemeral architecture seems to me a profoundly questionable activity. Not necessarily the specific object, nor always the formal result, but the very act of designing, building, dismantling, transporting, and discarding architecture conceived to last only a short time.

It is obvious that, on a planetary or universal scale, all architecture is ephemeral. Cathedrals, temples, palaces, and cities also end up as ruins, strata, or dust. But precisely for that reason, the question is not whether something will last forever, but whether it has been conceived with a reasonable will to permanence. In architecture, the less ephemeral a work is, the better.

A building should aspire to last two hundred, five hundred, or even a thousand years. And if it must last only a short time, then it should do so for a materially impeccable reason: because it is made with extremely sustainable, biodegradable, reusable materials, or materials with minimal or negative impact because they act as a carbon sink. Timber, certain natural fibres, or genuinely reversible systems can justify some temporary solutions. But when ephemeral architecture uses complex structures, industrial components, heavy transport, specialised assembly, and subsequent dismantling, its supposed lightness becomes a refined form of waste.

There may be exceptions. Ephemeral architecture can make sense if it reuses existing materials, if its components later serve other purposes, if it avoids building something worse, or if its symbolic, ritual, political, or artistic value fully justifies its short duration. But these exceptions should not obscure the general rule: building in order to destroy is almost always a form of unsustainability.

Put more categorically: ephemeral architecture should exist only if it meets one of two conditions: either it is materially almost innocent - reusable, biodegradable, reversible, or even a carbon sink - or it is symbolically so powerful that it deserves not to be ephemeral. Anything that meets neither condition belongs more to waste than to art, more to the consumption of forms than to the responsible construction of the world.

And more still: ephemeral architecture is justified only if it fails as ephemeral architecture. Only if its own ephemerality is defeated by the force of the work, only if what was meant to disappear proves that it deserved to remain, when posterity's recognition surpasses the act of the event itself, does the exception begin to be justified. Valuable ephemeral architecture is architecture that, in a certain sense, disobeys its destiny. If it is born to disappear and disappears without leaving behind any need for permanence, it probably did not need to exist.

And the symbolic threshold should be extremely high. Any ephemeral art, any architecture condemned to last only briefly, should aim, at the very least, at something on the order of the Eiffel Tower or the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona: a work born in connection with a specific occasion, but whose formal, symbolic, or historical power is so great that it ultimately demands permanence. Even in the case of Mies's Pavilion, the lesson should be more demanding still: it is not enough for something to deserve reconstruction later; what would truly be desirable is that it had been conceived so that it never had to disappear in the first place. If ephemeral architecture does not aspire to that intensity, if it does not aim to become so necessary that time itself contradicts its intended fate, then it would probably be better if it did not exist.

Absolute Success as the Failure of Ephemerality

Here the decisive paradox appears: ephemeral architecture can be justified only when it fails absolutely as ephemeral architecture. Not when it is simply interesting, ingenious, beautiful, or celebrated for a few days, but when it reaches such a degree of success that its disappearance begins to seem like a mistake. Its true success consists in becoming incompatible with its own temporal destiny. Ephemeral architecture is worthwhile only when it is so extraordinary that it can no longer be accepted as ephemeral.

That is why the threshold must be almost unattainable. The point is not to ask every pavilion, installation, or temporary structure to be merely correct, sustainable, or suggestive. The point is to demand that it aspire to extreme intensity: that, like the Eiffel Tower, it turn its provisional nature into a historical anomaly; that it make it evident that the world would lose something if it disappeared. If it cannot aspire to this absolute failure of its ephemerality, if it cannot become a super-success against its own destiny of disappearance, then it is almost always better that it not exist.

The consequence is harsh but necessary: the higher the standard imposed on ephemeral architecture, the more its legitimacy contracts. Only a few works can justify the expense, assembly, dismantling, transport, energy, and matter invested in something designed to last only a short time. Precisely because the exception must be so extreme, the general rule should be abstention. When in doubt, do not build. In the face of a mere idea, do not build. In the face of simple temporary spectacle, do not build. Ephemeral architecture is saved only when it becomes too important to remain ephemeral.

Truly responsible architecture should not celebrate its disappearance, but its permanence. Not because everything must be monumental, heavy, or eternal, but because the world does not need more material gestures destined to exhaust themselves in a season, a fair, an exhibition, or a photograph. It does not need to produce novelty, consume it, photograph it, make it viral, advertise it, globalise it, and replace it. It needs works capable of ageing, adapting, being repaired, and continuing to serve.

In this sense, in the human construction of the world, Parmenides should be the goal, even while knowing with Heraclitus that the world changes. The surface of reality may be Heraclitean: flow, transformation, erosion, time, wear, replacement. But precisely for that reason architecture, in its skeleton, should aspire to permanent permanence. Not because it can absolutely defeat becoming, but because its highest function consists in introducing duration, stability, and presence where everything tends to pass away. The world changes; architecture responds by trying to remain. Exposure to the elements is natural, the natural state of things: the function of architecture is to offer shelter from it to the happiest extent possible.

Conceptual sketch: a mutable skin over a skeleton conceived to remain.

Therefore, against the contemporary fascination with the temporary, it would be worth reclaiming an architecture of long duration. If we use concrete, stone, steel, ceramics, or other materials with a high ecological cost, we should demand a long service life from them. A concrete structure should not be conceived for a few decades, but for centuries. Sustainability does not consist only in reducing the initial impact, but in multiplying the time during which that impact remains justified.

All architecture will disappear one day. But that truth does not turn deliberate transience into a virtue. On the contrary: the more finite the world is, the greater our obligation to build as if things ought to last. The skin can and should change every season, but the skeleton should leave its mark for centuries upon centuries, if at all possible.